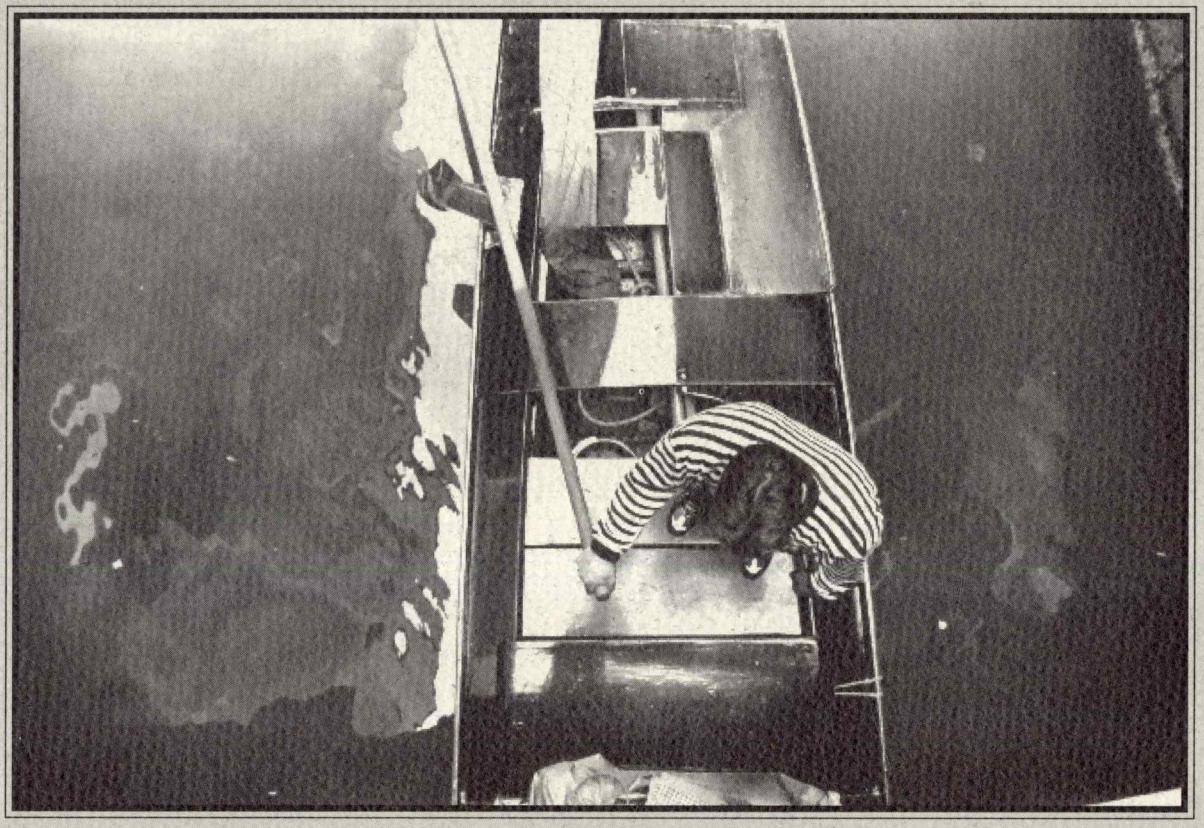
The Tower 1997



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The Tower 1997

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While the Men of the Clan Hunted, the Women Gathered Berries

by Jessica Cornelson

My jeans and bra strewn over a formerly neat pile of research –
the velvety smooth black & white photocopied pages
(Like the soft fur, moist skin of my cat's nose).
Articles, lovingly and painstakingly collected,
Contraband chapters of books from foreign libraries:
Each page infinitely more precious
than the slow silvery tink of dirty, much loved dimes
dropped into the grooved, channel-canals of mimeographed reproduction.
The jump, whirrr, slide, bright light of the machine
and the effort to gently, but firmly, apply even pressure
to the books, bound volumes of journals
so that each word be equally clear.

Gathering research is playing with bugs in the vegetable garden,
Hands in the warm-cool moist dirt.
It is sticking my child, bare feet
into the deep caverns left by my grandfather's boots
as he turns open the earth behind the tiller.

Later, I will read. Spin and thread the pages together:
Maybe I will wear this one to the gates of grad schools
requesting; demanding entrance —
Confident in Plan B:
Scale the walls at midnight
with the bullet proof armor
and take the president hostage.

But probably not.
I will just procrastinate a little longer
In this decadent nest that I have lined
with the Intellectual Currency of Our Time,
Making mudpies and
Telling myself stories about Grandpa.

POEM FOR BEE-LUH JOHN
by Randy Williams

When I was two years old
The Fab Four played the Sullivan show
For the very first time,
And for the very first time
I was aware of life and energy,
Music and mystery
Beyond the shabby Southern small-town
Duplex where we lived.
It's hard to pinpoint,
More than thirty years later,
Just what in those flickering images
And scrappy melodies
Enchanted and captivated me so.

They say I was a withdrawn,
Shy, stuttering slip of a boy,
That I couldn't pronounce BEATLES,
That I said Bee-luhs and Libberpool,
But that I knew their names—
Bee-luh Paul, Bee-luh George,
Bee-luh Ringo, and my favorite,
Wise-cracking, shaggy-haired Bee-luh John.
There is a picture of me at three,
A black and white boy playing
A record on a little portable player;
A Beatles lunch box is opened in front of me,
And spilling out of it are black and white forty-fives.

In those days, Daddy had to cut corners,
So he cut my hair with clippers –
Making do with a bit of elbow grease –
And I had a funny little crew-cut
With a cow-lick in the front.
And on those nights he drank too much
And fought back at the world
With his fist and the back of his hand,
I would run to the backyard cherry tree,
Climb high, and sing a Fab song or two,
Wishing all the while that I could
Be wise-cracking and shaggy-haired
And brave, just like Bee-luh John.

This was the soundtrack of my childhood:
We all live in a yellow submarine,
It's been a hard day's night,
I get by with a little help from my friends,
I'd Like to be under the sea
In an octopus's garden,
The magical mystery tour
Is coming to take you away,
All you need is love, love, love, love.
Those were songs from a far-away
Place of pure imagination—
Whispered into a microphone hot-wired to my brain.
Oh-la-di Ob-la-da, life goes on.

Weeks before my eighteenth Christmas
I sat uncharacteristically watching TV football,
And Howard Cosell interrupted the game
To say that a man who wanted to be
Just like shaggy-haired, wise-cracking
Beatle John had shot his idol dead
In front of a New York apartment building.
For two days, I dragged out musty
Old albums and photos, and I listened
And I looked and I remembered,
And I wished I had a cherry tree
To climb, wished I could find my voice
And sing a Fab song or two.

On the third day I drove to work,
And the car radio played a simulcast
From New York, where the DJ could see
Through his window and over the treetops of Central Park
To the crowd gathered outside Lennon's home—
Could *look at all the lonely people*—
And the DJ seemed to be losing his voice,
So he whispered into the microphone,
"New York, if you loved this man and this music,
If he meant anything to you at all,
Turn on your headlights —I know it's daytime,
But I want you to turn them on."

And, according to the DJ, nearly everyone did.

In a faraway place, without even thinking,
I flipped on my own headlights;
And suddenly lights flickered on
Up and down the main drag
Of the Southern small town where I lived,
They say the transition to adulthood is gradual,
A series of small events we barely remember—
But in the cold light of a December day,
I found myself sobbing by the side of the road
As I watched a make-shift funeral procession
For my boyhood hero,
And for my boyhood.

Time to Slap Gary
John S. Wendel

The A.C.'s on full blast at 111 Eisenhower St. September 5, 1989, and not the faintest hint of autumn in the air.

Gary's lying limp on an old beat up brown Easy-Boy recliner, next to the drawn, grey with dust, window blinds. A butane spotted rag rests in the palm of his right hand. A lit cigarette droops, precariously placed, between the fingers of his left hand.

Foggy....

Everything is turning to fog: a hazy grey snot filled fog. Through the haze he can just make out Lisa's long bare legs- her canvas high topped feet moving to the warped sounds of cymbles and the crash of guitars. Maybe it's not even music. Maybe it's the far off sound of a steam engine, heard through a small hole in a mile long tunnel.

Gary: he fucked up.

It's been an entire week now and the youth are getting restless. The Autumnal harvest is right around the corner, but that might as well be next year some time. Hell, things wern't nearly as bad this time last year. Maybe it has something to do with those five brand new cop cars the city recently appropriated last month, complete with five brand new officers of the law. Maybe it has something to do with election year. Maybe the holders are holding out. One can only speculate. Anyway, the circumstances are irrelivant. It all adds up to the same thing: the city is dry. Dry as a bone.

Neither Gary, Lisa, nor J.D. — who sits by the phone, smoking, foot madly shaking — have wrapped their lips around a single stick of reefer in one whole week. One whole week. And that was just some dried up shake. The remnants of what had once been a full half-ounce of beautiful, fat, gooey, skunk buds. Gary'd gone on one of his infamous pharmaceutical binges, mixed with mass quantities of Old Milwaukee, and had lost that last bit of shake that fits so nice and snug in the corner of a plastic baggie. It miraculously turned up exactly one week ago in some real fucking obvious place, like the watch pocket of his favorite pair of Levi's that he just happened to be

wearing on that particular day. Having just finished smoking the last bit of resinous goo, poked out of the odd bits of paraphenalia sitting atop the coffee table- where Gary's numb foot presently rests- they rolled up the remains of the bone-dry shake.
As far as joints go, this one was pretty laughable: somewhere between the size of a needle and a toothpick. But there's something truly aesthetically pleasing about a joint, even the smallest pinner. And knowing that this might be the last time they'd taste marijuana, at least for a day or two, they mutually decided that a joint rolled in a French Light J.B. 1.0 was the best medium for partaking in their favorite pastime. But that was a week ago. Practically an eternity. Lisa's not too fucked up about the situation. She's a woman now, entering her second year of college. Lisa's on the move. Her classes are mostly boring shit, but she's passing. Right now Lisa's dancing, long arms swaying in the cool stale air, legs dragging across the dirty red shag carpet. Jane's Addiction plays. Her favorite tape. The soundtrack to a fucked up summer.

"Pathetic!" says Lisa, over the loud music, noticing pasty faced Gary, dribble making its way over his chin and down his neck.

SLAP!

Gary's fucked up alright. Circulation's poor. Lisa smacked him good, knocking the ash off his cigarette, but she barely marks his slack cheek.

"Whuu...." says Gary. But seconds later and hardly making any sound at all really.

Over bye the phone, J.D. crooks his head and says:

"What the fuck Lisa?"

"Just fucking look at him, man. He's fucking green!"

J.D. lights up another cig and thinks about it. The past week's turned him into a two pack a day man: Marlboro 100's. Life without reefer's been pretty hard on ole J.D. He needs this vice. His life as a pizza delivery driver, without a girl friend, combined with the fact that he quit drinking, is making him desperate.

He says, "God-damnit, I told him to lay off that shit. Dumb fuck'll do anything for a buzz. Remember that time he drank all that Robotusin and we had to put him in the closet because his insane mom was coming..."

Lisa interrupts, "Man, what are those pills he's been eating all day?"

"Umm... I'm, like, really not sure. Something he swiped from his mom's medicine cabinet. You know, she's always getting prescribed some shit. Halcion, Tranzine, Hydracodone, Phenobarbitol. Fuck, I dunno."

"Halcion," Lisa repeats, "Tranzine."

"Yeah, something like that. Man I dunno why he fucking does this to himself, Lisa. I told him Larry'd be coming through with some kind-buds for us any minute....today."

Lisa blurts, "Jesus Christ God Damnit! It's just a fucking plant. Marijuana. Nothing to get all hung up about. I mean, I love to get stoned-n-all, but like, you guys are like fucking crack junkies."

"Yeah, fuck you Lisa. Where are you gonna be when that fat sack finally comes through, huh. I'll tell you. You'll be sitting your hot ass right down on that couch waiting to wrap you're big lips around that big fat kind doobie."

"That's not the point, J.D., god-damnit. I mean, just look at Gary. It's pathetic is what it is. He's fucking drooling on himself like a retarded chimp...."

The phone rings. J.D. nearly falls off his chair. Lisa marches over to the couch and fires up a cigarette.

"Yeah," says J.D.

"Jaaay Deee, it's me, Matt. Listen, you seen bob around?"

"MATT. WHERE THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN, MAN? Of course I haven't seen bob around. I've been looking for bob for the past week, man. I don't think bob's ever been gone for an entire week before. Bob is dead man. BOB IS FUCKING DEAD!"

Matt is shocked. "J.D., brother, it's me, Matt. There's no need to be irate and hostile, dude. Man, I just thought you could help a brother out. Dude, I just got back from the summer shows. The energy was incredible. Jerry was smokin'."

"Look Matt, I'm really fucking sorry, but man I'm having a terrible day. I haven't seen bob for a

week. Lisa's over here being a cunt..."

"I am not being a cunt..."

"...Lisa's being a cunt. And Gary's over here drooling and turning green on the Lazy-Boy."

"Brother, I'm sorry."

"Would you please cut that Grateful Dead brother-man crap out."

Lisa's puffing away on her cigarette. She strolls over and slaps Gary, like a bitch, knocking the burned out cigarette from his hand.

"Dude, J.D., what the hell was that."

"Nothing. Lisa just bitch-slapped Gary. Nothing to get all heavy and down about."

"Whoaaa...well listen man, I scored some grade-A paper on tour. Brother, this is the cleanest I've eaten in a long time. Very potent. Heavy visuals. Anyway, seeing as you're one of my old bros, and all, I'd be willing to cut you a killer deal: four bucks a tab."

"No way am I gonna eat any of that shit right now. Not only is everything totally fucked right now, but I swore the stuff off at the beginning of the summer."

"Bad trip, bro."

"Jesus, I guess you could call it that. You remember Jack Angstrom?"

"Uh, yeah. Skinny little brother. Glasses."

"Yeah, that's him. You remember all that blue unicorn that came through here before you went to follow that fat old Santa Clause looking mother fucker."

"Uh...Yea."

"Alright, well me and Jack and some others all decided to drop one afternoon. Everything was going real smooth. We all drank a bunch of juice and downed some b-12's. You know, all that shit you're supposed to do for a good trip. Anyway, the shit started kicking in real good, and we're all riding it out nice and easy and everything's cool. Well, all of a sudden Jack starts saying, 'Why do we exist? Why do we exist?' At first, we just think Jack's fuckin' off and being Jack. You know, he's always reading and thinking about stuff and saying crazy shit like that. So we're all laughing about it and like asking him the same thing: 'I dunno, Jack, why do we fucking exist?' Well, then after a while, it's not so funny anymore. I mean, Jack won't shut the fuck up about it. I mean, he's really wiggin' out about it. Like really thinking about this whole existence thing. And it seems like almost an hour's gone bye, and he's still hung up on it. I don't know, maybe it wasn't an hour. You know how fucked up time can be when you're trippin'. Anyway, Jack's getting way-way out there and he won't shut the fuck up. The thing is, it's starting to get to me. Like, I'm thinking, 'why do we exist, anyway?' I mean, it's pretty heavy when you think about it. And so it starts buggin' me, and I'm getting kind of sweaty. I'm thinking, 'What the fuck? Why do I exist? Like do I exist just so I can deliver pizza, or what?' Do you know what I mean, man? I mean, I've just never really thought about it. Well, before I started getting too fucking out there, Jack gets on the floor and curls up in fetal position. That was good, 'cause if Jack didn't shut up, I thought I was gonna start wiggin' my shit and I'd lose it forever. I mean, like Sid Barret, you know. But really, I can't stop thinking about it. So like, I locked myself in the bathroom for a while. I must have smoked ten cigarettes in there, trying to come down a little. Anyway, I stopped shaking and sweating after a while, and I wasn't too worried about my fucked up existence anymore. So, I go back into the living room. Rembrant Pussyhorse is going full blast on the stereo, and all my so-called friends have ditched me. All except Jack, who's still curled up on the floor. Only, I noticed that he's gone and pissed his pants. Trippin' balls and angry as a motherfucker, I swore I'd never touch paper again.

Anyway Matt, I can't help you."

"Dude, that's pretty heavy. But are you sure, brother. It's real clean."

"God-damnit, yes I'm sure. Why else would I have gone and told you all this shit if I wasn't sure."

"O.K. brother, calm down."

"Look Matt, we've been friends for a long time. But you're not my fucking brother. Now, don't be calling up here no more, unless you got some good news about bob, and you happen, for once in you're fucking life, to be the one that's holding."

"But, bra..."

Click.

J.D. gets himself another cig and runs his fingers

through his thinning hair. Twenty years old and already suffering from male pattern baldness. He's thinking, 'That stupid Jerry Garcia worshipping motherfucker. The fuck's he doing calling at a time like this."

Lisa's over by the stereo. It's time to slap Gary, only she's not ready. Needs more tunes. J.D.'s walking into the living room, puffing away on Marlboro number eighteen.

He says, "Lisa, if you play Jane's Addiction one more time I swear to god, I'm gonna scream."

"Well what the fuck do you wanna hear?"

"Let's watch T.V."

"Man, there's nothing on T.V. right now."

Gary mumbles, all but choking on his words, "Scoobu-sku."

He's trying to say Scoobie-Doo: his favorite program in the whole world. Comes on every weekday afternoon.

J.D. says, "What did he say?"

"Man, I think he said Scoobie-Doo?"

"God-Damnit, Gary, Scoob's not on now. Besides, we gotta get stoned to watch that."

Gary says nothing. He's looking worse and worse just since the last time he tried to speak, barely a half-minute ago. Lisa says:

"He can't fucking hear you, J.D."

She strolls over to the Lazy-Boy.

"Can you?" she says. "Ha, fucker?"

Gary doesn't say shit. Doesn't even make a sound. He doesn't even flinch because he can't move. He can't move because he's forgotten how to breathe.

Gary's not breathing anymore.

Lisa doesn't know this yet. She's sick of this shit. Wants to yell about it.

"ANSWER ME, FUCKER! ANSWER ME! WHY CAN'T YOU FUCKING ANSWER ME, GARY? HA?...HA?.....YOU CAN'T ANSWER ME BECAUSE YOU'RE TOO FUCKED UP! FUCKED UP ON ALL THAT SHIT YOU'VE BEEN EATIN' AND FUCKED UP ON ALL THAT SHIT YOU'VE BEEN HACKIN'!"

Lisa's pissed, alright. She goes on and on and on. Lisa gets this way sometimes. And when she gets this way, she must use the f-word at least five thousand times.

J.D.'s standing there watching this and listening and smoking. He feels something in the pit of his stomach more horrible than he's ever felt in his entire life. He knows something. That thing Lisa didn't realize before she started screaming her fucking head off. J.D. touches Lisa on the shoulder.

"OH, WHAT THE FUCK MAN?"

Lisa turns around and when she sees the look on J.D.'s face, she begins to get that god-awful feeling in the pit of her stomach, and she doesn't say another word.

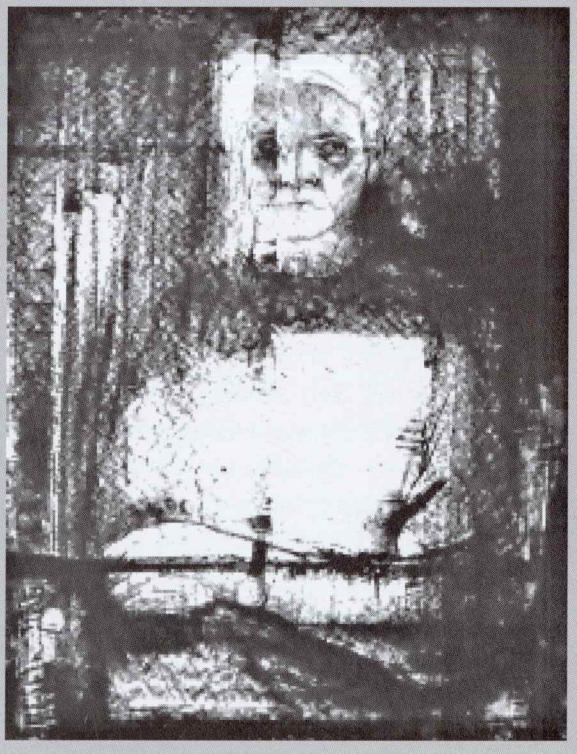
"Lisa, I think you need to sit down."

Without a word she sits right down on the couch and gets herself a cigarette.

J.D. touches Gary's cheek, and puts his finger under his nose, and touches around on his neck. He has all the information he needs.

"God almighty," is all he says, and then goes and sits down next to Lisa.

"Lisa," says J.D., very softly, barely getting the words out, "I...I don't think Gary's ever going to watch Scoobie-Doo with us, anymore."



Asshole with an Appetite

by Jason Free

Dwayne, Kelly's fiance, had been on her futon ever since he'd been kicked out of the M.F.A. program two months ago. That day, two months ago, he'd knock on her door looking flushed and tired with his backpack draped over his shoulder. "They booted me out today," he said to her as he dropped the pack to the floor and headed to the kitchen for a beer. Kelly remained seated on the futon and did not respond. She wanted to say something positive but was too worried to think clearly. She wasn't totally surprised that he had been asked to leave. His work for the past year had noticeably dropped in quality and he had had many long conferences with the department head as to how he could turn things around. They sat together for the remains of the evening, sporadically discussing Dwayne's next move, but came to no definitive conclusion.

The day after the bad news, things got considerably worse. The university's financial aid services called Dwayne's answering machine to notify him of his loan situation. The woman's gravel-like voice said he was immediately responsible for all interest accrued during his enrollment and would have to begin the repayment of the principal in ninety days. After initial panic and a lengthy debate, Kelly volunteered to hawk her television and stereo to take care of the interest and tried to reassure Dwayne that everything would work itself out. They had planned on moving in together at the beginning of the year when both their leases were up for renewal. She convinced him when this happened they could then focus the majority of their income on the loan without feeling the pinch.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," Dwayne said, his face very pale. "Besides we can get better equipment for a wedding present."

Although Dwayne helped her pack everything into the car, Kelly went to the pawn shop by herself and just barely managed to haggle enough for the first payment. When she got home with the money, he was laid out on the futon and that's where he had slept every night since. She followed her usual routine for the next week and tried to act as if things were not weird so his mood would brighten. But nothing got better.

With no television or stereo, Dwayne turned to his writing for solace. He was convinced that if he worked hard enough on some material he would be able to return to the program, correcting his mistake. This became an obsession that could not be denied, not even for Kelly. They'd stopped making love the day she returned from the pawn shop. He rejected her advances until she stopped trying all together. He said he was exhausted and had to concentrate on his writing. Everything else was a distraction he could not afford to entertain. She frequently asked to see what he'd done while brooding on the futon, but he always refused her requests. Once in a while he'd go to the bathroom and to the kitchen but other than that he lived on the futon, smoking cigarettes and writing.

After the first month, Kelly's co-workers began commenting on the dark circles under her eyes. She casually waved off their concern and anxiously switched topics. The change in her appearance was obvious. She did not need anyone to point it out to her. She saw it every morning in the bathroom mirror, Her eyes seemed to have retreated deep into their sockets, giving her face a coarse, biological ugliness. The dark circles had turned purple and new, faint lines were branching across her forehead and away from her mouth. Even though he spent the entire day writing and resting, Dwayne had no problem drifting to sleep. At night, they'd lie on the futon back to back. Kelly stared at the walls as she listened to his breathing, hoping to hear something that would tell her how to proceed with the relationship. She listened every night but never got the answer. She soon had trouble staying awake during the day and one time almost caused a major accident on the interstate during rush hour. When she came home that day, her hands shaking and her voice on the verge of breaking into tears, she tried to talk seriously to Dwayne. He had to realize that things were wrong.

"Why won't you listen to me?" she asked his profile.

He looked away from his notes just long enough to say, "I'm not hungry enough Sweetheart, but just be patient." He chuckled to himself and continued writing

as if she were not there. That's when she knew she had to leave him.

By this time, Dwayne was sleeping close to twenty hours a day. This allowed Kelly to pack her things out without starting a fight. The towels and other bathroom items were the first to go. Dwayne never noticed. He showered once a week and used the same beige towel. The kitchen proved to be more difficult. Although he chiefly ate microwave dinners, Dwayne went through forks at an astonishing rate. She decided to leave the silverware, her mother would be more than happy to replace it, and to take the microwave with her when she left for good.

Today, Kelly sits in her car, the engine still running, thinking of the past weeks and watching her building. Although it's mid January, the Honda's air conditioning is running wide open and she unconsciously begins rocking back and forth. The light of her one room, second floor efficiency is on and she knows Dwayne is waiting. For the first time, she notices that her room, a newly added section to the aged structure, resembles a life boat clinging to a petrified ship. She tries to laugh at this but can only manage a short whimper from her chest. She finally removes the key from the ignition. "Fuck it," she says to the dashboard. "He can have the damn microwave. I just have to end it."

The walk up the stairs to the second floor is lost behind a fog of unanswered questions and regrets. She slips her key into the lock and hears a sudden flurry of movement behind the door. Before she has time to reach for the knob, Dwayne opens the door with a nicotine stained smile.

"Where have you been, Sweetheart?" he asks. "I was getting worried about you."

Kelly walks past him and gives a noncommittal grunt. Her mind is racing for the best thing to say but was still coming up blank. As she sits on the futon, she notices a pile of notebook paper covered with blue black scribblings.

"You won't believe what I did today," Dwayne says as he closes the door behind her. Kelly does not answer.

"I finished a poem I've been working on and I'm sure when Kazmier sees it everything will go back to normal. It's that good."

She sees that for the first time in months he is genuinely excited and optimistic, but she knows it is only temporary. She scans the room for anything that she might have forgotten to pack and notices that the floor had been swept and possibly even mopped. He sits beside her and ruffles through the pages.

"Wait till you hear this, Kelly," he says as he carefully pulls away the frayed, left side of the papers. "I'm serious. It was like the clouds opening up. I ripped through the first draft this morning in fifteen minutes –"

"Dwayne, I have to –"

"– I've spent the rest of the day polishing the main points and I think it's done. I can't believe how easy it was. It's probably the best work I've ever done." She grabs his frantic hands and waits to speak until she knows Dwayne is giving his complete attention.

"I'm sure it's terrific," she starts slowly. "But I have something very important to tell you."

"Just let me read this to you first," he says. "I haven't read to you in a long time. I promise it's good."

Soon after their first date, Dwayne and Kelly knew they were beginning a serious relationship. He read poetry to her while they laid nude on the futon. Words, some Dwayne's but mostly Ashbery, Bukowski, Ferlinghetti and cummings, floated over her body for hours. She had always thought foreplay required touching. Sitting on the same futon, she knows that time is gone forever, along with the trusting woman she was then, but feels obligated to give it one more chance.

"Okay. Sure."

He smiles again and shuffles through the paper until he finds the correct page. He clears his throat as if he were addressing Congress and begins.

Of Service

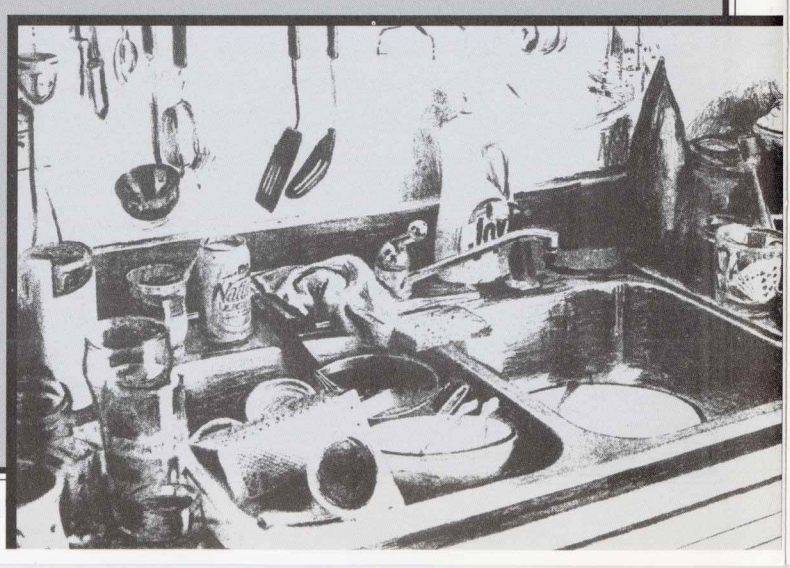
— a poem honoring the realization that poems aren't going to change anything for anybody

Man, I could change this world if these
assholes gave me the chance.
I've figured it *all* out.

Everything starts out small, see.
They did that one on purpose.
But I ain't gonna stay small.
My poetry will take the place of any so-called life I might have had if I'd followed the rules.
My words ain't going to change this crazy, mean, fucked up and down
world of shit and more shit.
I will not change the world, but I sure as hell will change you.
One at a time.
Like if you're reading this here piece of shit now, I'm making some progress ain't I?
And if it scares you or you decide to wipe your ass with this work of art,
I'm glad to be of service.
That's why I'm here.

I've unraveled the problem of making a
stranger feel my presence with
intangible words.
The poet as rapist.
Lusting to get inside someone, will hurt you
if necessary so just cooperate
and you'll be better off
Look, the poet uses words like everyone else
uses spit or Vaseline or Crisco to
excite and prepare a lover.
The vowels and the smaller shafted consonants are fairly easy to take even for the more tight-assed amongst you while bigger, wider consonants require in some cases the use of drugs and alcohol.
(We have of course the possibility that this
poem will become an active member
of the Western canon,
And when some eighth grade English teacher
says my name for an assignment,
the boys will grumble while the little
girls smile real pretty and say that
I was a good guy.)
So I'm a poet.
I rub words on a page and you slowly take
them in.
After that, it's all up to me.
Right now.
Feeling it inside yet? Huh?
This hot, slick, sloppy, suckable poem
slipped into a cock ring and jammed
up your ass.
And you stop scratching and biting and we're
almost enjoying it until this stranger
decides to piss up your asshole and
you begin to taste it and it comes out
your mouth and then I start kissing
you.
The poet fucking the reader.
The poet pissing in the reader's mouth,
kissing and drinking his own words.
Setting up a cycle to keep it flowing forever
and ever and ever.
He gets more turned on. You get hotter and
horny for more.
I want you to look at this fucking poem. Lick
it. Look at it again real long.
Now go ahead and relax and see how easy it is a second time.
Go ahead.
Good.
Good.
I told you.
I'm glad to be of service."

Kelly stares at her fiance's eyes as he waits for her response. As she rises from the futon, she hopes her expression is enough for him to understand why she removes her engagement ring, drops it on the strained pages resting on his lap, and walks out of the apartment, leaving the door wide open.



Looking

By Paul McGrann

Upon first glance, Billy seemed like any other boy, but in taking that second glance, especially if Billy was attempting a task which involved the hands, one couldn't help but realize Billy had no thumbs.

Billy fully understood why he was as he was or rather as his Uncle Johnny explained, "You's is simply Jesus' attack against scientists. Ever since they started telling people that man is the son of a monkey shit, everyone stopped believing in God, and Billy-boy you's is God's attempt to give folks faith. For anyone of them scientists would call you a throw back saying you's is missen what makes man a man, the positive thumb. But you always remember that only Jesus can judge, and in the eyes ah Jesus your soul shines as much as any man's." Billy always was afraid that just as he had no thumbs perhaps he had no soul. But his Uncle Johnny assured him that he did have a soul, and that was all that mattered. He said, "Souls are better than thumbs, better than money. Souls is like a beer that can refill itself so as one soul can take a man all the way."

Uncle Johnny would always let Billy have one beer. Every night when they came home from work, Uncle Johnny would get two beers and pop them open, raise them in the air, and say, "Here's to Jesus. May he grant us the High Life when we're gone." Billy didn't like beer, but on account of his uncle's zeal for it, he felt obligated to drink it.

"Yes sir, Mr. Miller was'a blessed man, made a good drink, put that eagle on it to let em all know it's as American as Detroit steel, and called it High Life in respect to God. Encouragin' men to think of raising themselves closer to God who sits higher than anyone or anything including any jackass on top the goddamn moon."

Billy always went to work with Uncle Johnny. Uncle Johnny was a plumber by trade. "Johnny's Plumbing Lowest Price in town" read across both sides of the truck. Billy liked to plumb. It was second nature to him. He had sat in bathrooms and on kitchen floors for as long as he could remember. The hard part was learning how to hold the tools. He figured out how to use just about every tool. His fingers were finally long enough so he could grip most anything, and Uncle Johnny had carved out finger niches on all his hammers and mallets so Billy could get a tight grip. Uncle Johnny was a channel lock man, but pliers were one tool Billy couldn't use. Putting a hand on each handle was just too damn awkward so he bought Billy a fine set of crescent wrenches. At the age of ten, Billy was every bit as good a plumber as his uncle. His uncle knew it. He'd give all the bathroom jobs to Billy. They'd go into a bathroom, and Uncle Johnny would immediately shut the door. As Billy started working on the problem, Uncle Johnny would pull a beer out of the bottom of the tool chest, which was always filled with ice and a six pack every morning. He would find a comfortable seat, if there was no bathtub to sprawl out in, and slowly nod off.

Later that day, Uncle Johnny laid in a tub with a beer in his hand. "You need any help Billy?"

"Naw, nothing but a clogged goose neck."

"Go figure, Billy. Jackass can afford a big house like this but have to call us in to pull a gooseneck. Just goes to show ya, as long as folks shit, piss, and need water, you'll always be able to get by."

"How come you never tell me bout my momma and daddy?"

"Hell didn't see 'em but an hour or so. They shown up in the middle of the night bangin' at the door. I open it up and your momma comes in given me this big hug saying 'Uncle Johnny it's so good to see you again.' Your momma actin' like we was old buddys. Ain't never seen her before, hadn't even seen my sister since she headed out to Mississippi thirty years ago. Anyways, she comes in talkin' fast about how her momma's just the sourest creature alive runnin' em out the house claiming 'better y'all die trying than rot in my house!' Well, by that point, she was all in tears hoping they could just stay one night. On account they had you, just a little one, and your daddy had already nodded off in the easy chair, I handed her a beer hopin' to calm her down, told her there were beans on the stove, and went back to bed. Woke up the next morning, found you curled up asleep in the corner with no trace of your folks. But don't you look back, for it ain't anything you'll ever figure. I took you on in like a stray dog that'd come my way. You couldn't been but two. You was walkin' but not talkin' much. I just

stuck by you, Billy, and somehow we've always gotten by.

Billy couldn't remember what his parents looked like. It was just another mystery in his life, kinda like his thumbs.

Things were going real good. Billy got as fast as any plumber alive. He could size up the problem real quick. Most times they were in empty houses, so Billy could work while his uncle lumbered off to get any parts they didn't have with them. Sometimes Billy would need help, held up on threads, rusted nuts that needed a whole lotta push to break free'. Generally, Billy would lock the monkey wrench, or a crescent wrench, down on the nut, place a pipe over the handle, brace his shoulders against something, put his foot on the pipe, and push for all he was worth. That would usually bust them open.

Mornings were real productive, if there weren't any major hang-ups. Things always slowed down in the late afternoon, when Uncle Johnny took that nap. That was Billy's favorite time. He liked exploring and watching TV, if no one was at the house they were working on. Plus, Billy knew his uncle was old, he'd asked him once.

"Hell if I know. I stopped countin' a long time ago. I figure a man don't live no longer for keepin' track. It's like drinking beer. You don't care how many you got behind you. What's important is that there's another one comin' and you just keep drinkin' 'em down till you drift away."

None the less, they were doing more jobs and eating better than they ever had.

"Billy, I got one word to say to you. T-bone."

"T-bone," Billy thought smiling knowing things were good. He thought he'd push it, "Hey. Uncle how's bout some soda pop with that meat?"

"Hell yes, partners" Billy liked that lately Uncle Johnny would occasionally refer to him as partner, and that made him feel real big and important.

As they were standing in the check out line, Uncle Johnny handed Billy two dollar bills to buy sodas with. Billy ran out to the vending machines with a sack. He kept putting his dollars and quarters in until he had four root beers for flavor and four Mr. Pibbs for energy sitting in the bin.

"Hurry up boy. Don't got all day," growled a voice from behind Billy.

Billy looked up. It was D. C. Monalds. Billy felt a string of fear wiggle down his spine. They worked at his big ranch house once several years back before Billy was any good at plumbing. Uncle Johnny figured the house was empty and told Billy he could go watch T. V. Billy knew a place this big was bound to have toys in it, so he went looking around.

He heard a woman's voice from down the hall, "Oh, my what big eyes you have."

"The better to see you with my sweet," a man's voice replied.

"Ohh MY what a big nose you have," said the woman, as Billy approached the door.

"The better to..." Billy opened the door. A woman, with bleached blonde hair and boobs too big to be called anything but bizarre, wearing nothing but shiny red panties and a red cape, let out a big scream. A man, D. C., popped up from the bed, "What in God's name are you doing in my house?" he hollered.

"Plummin'," replied Billy sheepishly.

Monalds jumped out of the bed, wearing nothing but underwear that had a wolf mask precariously glued to the front. Billy's eyes opened about the size of silver dollars as he turned running down the hallway yelling, "Monster Dick, Monster Dick!"

Uncle Johnny pulled his head out from under the sink as D. C. Monalds appeared at the bathroom door, his heavy body heaving for air, wolf mask staring right at Uncle Johnny, who slumped over in riotous laughter.

Billy crouched down behind his uncle using him as a shield.

D. C. turned beet red, "Get the Hell out of my house!"

"Take it easy, Monster Dick. Just don't bite us, " replied uncle Johnny between fits of laughter.

Just then the bleached blonde woman, now in a robe, appeared in the doorway, "Who the hell are they?"

D. C. quickly flung her back down the hallway, "get back in that bedroom dumbass!"

"Now D.C. that didn't look much like the mis'iz."

"Don't fuck with me, you old drunk. You keep your mouth shut unless you wanta lose your freak. I'll put the law on you," the words bellowed from the balding, black haired face with beedy eyes and a flat nose.

Billy never could figure why uncle Johnny laughed. Monalds scared Billy; he didn't look at him then, and he couldn't look at him now, though he could feel those dark eyes leering at him.

Billy tried to hurry, but the sodas in the bin were too wet to get out with one hand. Billy put the plastic bag down so he could use both hands, but just as he pulled a soda out, a breeze swept the sack drifting away down the sidewalk like a lost soul.

"Christ boy, ain't no hope for you."

Billy kneeled in front of the soda machine, both hands digging into it nervously trying to fish out the sodas.

"Hell, you're just like some barn animal slopin' for grule in a trough."

"Only animal I see is you wolfman," came Uncle Johnny's voice, clear as thunder from near the exit of the

grocery store.

"Listen to the old drunk," Monalds replied, turning to the small group of onlookers checking out the commotion.

"We all got are crutches don't we D.C.," Uncle Johnny stated, standing in front of Monalds, looking him straight into his eyes, and placing his grocery bag next to Billy, who cursed each soda as he dropped them in the sack.

"Don't say anything you'll regret, Johnny."

"All I got to say is that boy is as strong and smart as any, and you owe him an apology."

"Tell you what, Johnny. How's about tomorrow we see what your foundlin' is made of. He can wrestle one of my pigs."

In Choogla county, pig wrestling was the main attraction at the annual county fair. The idea was that a man wasn't a man unless he could wrestle down a pig of equal weight. Of course children were only allowed to watch, for an angry pig is as vicious a creature as anyone would want to ever stand up against.

"You can give that pig ten pounds on Billy's ninety-five, and he'll still bring it down,"
claimed Uncle Johnny to the incredulous group of bystanders who had circled in.

"Done deal, you come to my place at noon and we'll let the pig decide."

As Billy and Uncle Johnny walked off to their truck, they could hear D.C. Monalds inviting the excited folks who had gathered out to his place to see the big "show".

On the way home Billy started crying.

Uncle Johnny pulled off the side of the highway, "Billy look here, don't let him weigh you down. You're better than that. If you look into his eyes, you won't find a damn thing behind 'em. He moves and breathes, but he ain't half as alive as you Billy."

Billy didn't know what his Uncle Johnny was talking about. All he could feel was hurt, a deep lump in his throat that wouldn't go down. All he knew was wrestling was something he couldn't do. You need thumbs to grab something moving fast.

Uncle Johnny could feel Billy's pain. He felt his own eyes glass over, "Billy don't think 'bout it, we're strugglers you and me. That's all the sense I've ever made out of it. We don't add up. A drunken great uncle tryin' to raise a boy. But I believe in you, Billy boy, and tomorrow you gotta stand strong."

Billy wiped his nose on his shirt sleeve, brushed the tears of his face with those strange hands, and cleared his throat, "I'll try."

At dinner, Billy stared and picked at his steak, didn't drink a single soda, and went to bed early. Uncle Johnny didn't pass out that night. He held a framed photograph of himself when he was standing next to a young pregnant lady as he cried himself to sleep.

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Billy stood there ankle high in rank, wet, mud, within a thirty foot square pen, surrounded by what must have been nearly all the town. Word had spread like fire on gasoline. People thought it was delightful that there was going to be pig wrestling out of season, but then to hear it was the first child match and not just any child, but that plumbers boy, the deformed bastard. Well, there was no missing a special event like that. Some said it would be the biggest laugh one could ask for. A few said it was wrong, positively horrible; they weren't sure if they'd be able to watch. But they came, all eyes looking out at the boy with no thumbs in the pig sty.

"Nothin' to be afraid of. You can lick him, Billy, you can lick him!" yelled Uncle Johnny, leaning against the corner of the pen raising a sixteen ounce High Life up into the air.

Billy wasn't afraid. He was empty. There they all were; faces he had seen around town, faces that had given him nothing but pity or laughter.

The pen door creaked open. Everyone fell silent. Billy stood at the opposite end from D.C. Monalds, smiling with a pig on a rope. Everyone knew that pig weighed more than ten pounds over Billy, but Monalds asked, "You wanna weigh him, Johnny'?"

"No D. C., cause I trust in that boy as sure as I know I'm a drunk and your a lecher."

The spectators gasped except for Monalds' blushing wife.

Monalds glared at Uncle Johnny, released the rope, and slapped the pig on the ass.

Most times, it wasn't until the human engaged the pig that the ruckus began, but this pig of Monalds was one wicked swine. Folks said that it was the meanest pig they had ever seen, except old Gimpy Joe, who swears the pig that did his knee in was the cruelest fiend to ever set foot on earth or burn in Hell. Folks speculated on what made that pig so cross; some claiming Monalds fed it little and beat it a lot, while others saying it was one of them hybirds, half pig and half wild boar. No matter though, for when Monalds slapped that pig on the ass, it ran, charging straight at Billy.

Billy stood there expressionless watching the pig coming closer thinking he wasn't going to be anyone's punch line anymore.

The pig was pure ruthlessness, putting it's head down and ramming Billy right in the gut, sending him straight back, sliding in the mud.

Billy lay in the mud with his arms extended. The mud must of covered his ears, for he couldn't hear the jeering and the laughing. He didn't see anything but clear blue sky and rolling clouds. He felt as if he was some chunk of white mist, swirling in the clouds, moving through the heavens, without body, without mind.

Everyone watched the pig circle around the pen, as if trying to gain speed to finish the deed off. The pig was almost on top of Billy when he quickly tucked his knees up against his chest, getting his feet up under the pig, and extended his legs, sending the pig a good five feet into the air and sliding at least that many more. Both boy and pig got to their feet at the same time. The pig, mad as ever, let out a deep low snort and came fast at Billy. Once again, Billy stood there expressionless. The pig neared. Billy jumped up, extending his legs straight out in front of him, and landed ass first square on the pigs shoulders, collapsing its front feet, driving the pig down into the mud head first, sliding a good ten feet with Billy majestically sitting backwards on top of the pig. THUD! broke the silence as the pig's head slammed into a post. Billy stood up. Everyone was quiet, except Uncle Johnny who yelled, "BILLY BOY!" as loud as loud could humanly be.

Billy could feel his eyes swelling up as he walked the length of the pen to stand before D.C. Monalds.

"Well, Billy," said Monalds smugly, "I guess I owe you an apology,"

Billy stared him straight in the eyes. "No Sir" he said flatly, as a tear streaked down both sides of his face. He raised his voice, " I don't want nothin' from you," pointing his thumbless hand at Monalds and then turning to the people, "I don't want nothin' from none uh you."

Billy wiped the tears from his face and walked toward Uncle Johnny, who helped him out of the pen. They strode off, Uncle Johnny with an arm around Billy's neck, and Billy, half covered in mud, with an arm around Uncle Johnny's waist.

Everyone else stood there silent, not knowing either what to do or what to say, just looking.

END

bitter prayer of the modern-day stereotype

by Paul C. Wilm

unholy nut that I am
on this unholy nite...
nite of sexual insanities
of peeping through windows
only to see things I've already seen
time and time again
things never meant to be seen
(at least not by unholy nuts like me)

forgive me, friends
for spying on thee
for trespassing into yer sexual circus
(so unmistakably absent of me...)

forgive me, friends

for always playing upon the red throes of jealousy
for never being altogether accepted
as part of yer mad boy-loves-girl
girl-loves-boy dichotomy...

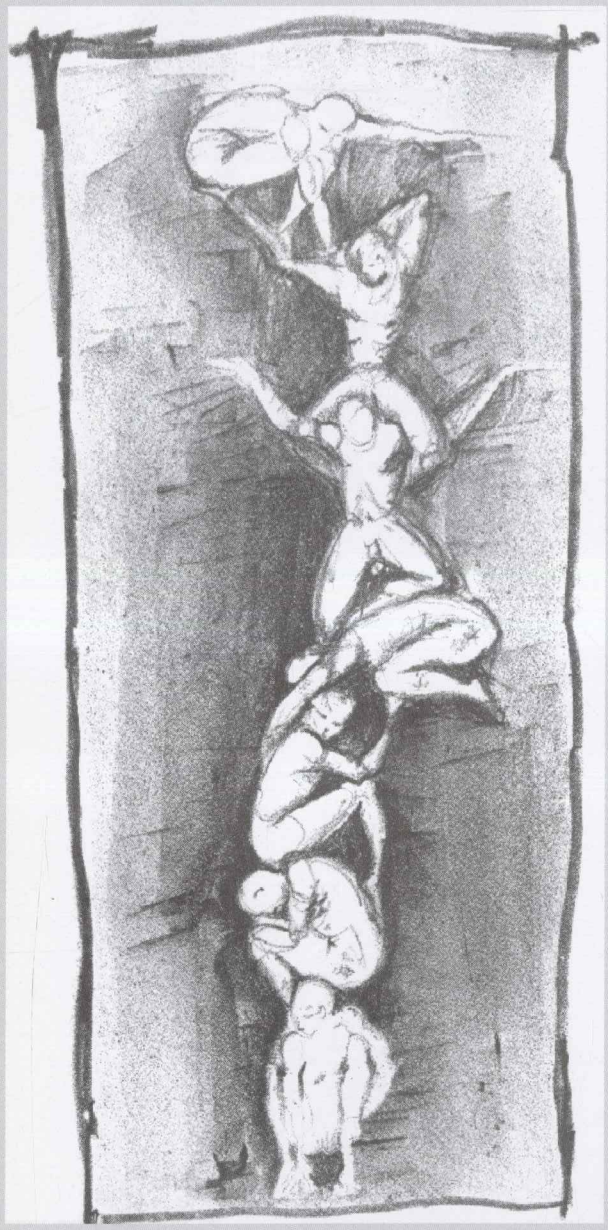
for here I sit tonite
in my unholy pink closet
filled with such feverish and guilt-ridden demons:
exasperation!!!
masturbation!!!
utter frustration!!!
impossible relations!!!
soul-deflation!!!

and let us not forget
to remember to thank you, friends...

for not sympathizing
for never empathizing
for simply trivializing all of those horns-and-tail frenzies
of mine.....

those drunken desperate, lispingly sad attempts
to once and for all smother Mr. Envy, bottled up in me so tight
thinking that he really just might make me
END IT ALL
(yes!!! it's gotten that bad
yes!!! I've grown that mad!!!)

So here I am
Yer loyal and faithful unholy nut…and if that is what I am, to you,
then okay, I'll accept this silly fate into my own two hands
I'll ride it like a shiny new car
in and out of yer beautiful lives
love and kisses
amen, I think.
(and may you all end up as beautiful husbands
and handsome wives)



The sun is rising

by Jesseca Cornelson

The sun is rising, and I cannot sleep.
On va mourir
(One will die)
(We all die)
(Everyone dies)
which is more certain than the future simple. Alan is dead and I have been a wreck. There must be some psychological function that makes you not care really, and
you let the alarm clock go off, and you go to school, work or wherever, or maybe
you are artsy and you watch a foreign film, but you do something.

Or
you imagine everyone that you
know lying in a casket at a wake or
underground, sealed away from the light.
And you suddenly realize that it's not just
your mother, husband, lover who will die
and be posed for a final visitation, but you,
too, will have your hair washed and brushed
by a stranger, a serene pose molded
on your face.
And someone will cry for you.
Someone else's life will be disrupted.

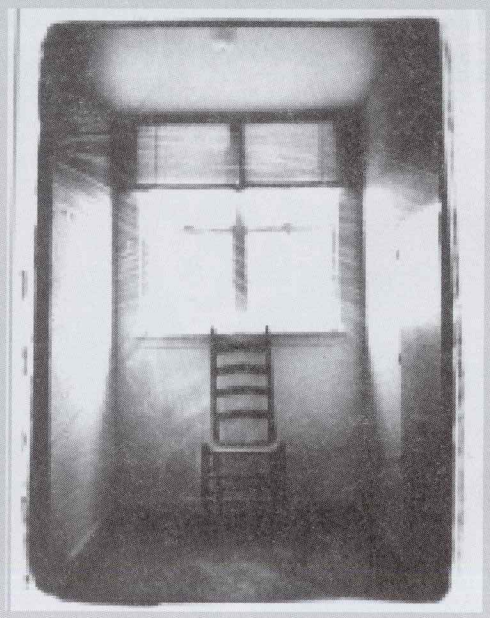
And all of this is not morbid.
It is the futur proche, the
future close, and it is
certain, whether in five minutes
or five years or whenever, and
it is taking over the spoken language:
eating, rent, weather.

When I sat in the cemetery on the road
that intersects with 119 at Momma Em's,
watching cows and playing with leaves,
I was so scared that I had some disease and
was dying. But all along it was my Alan that
was escaping me.

And When he told me after class
that he loved me, I thought he was crazy
and I went to physics and made fun of him with my

roommate. And I can see the way his chest
was birdlike and poked out, rounded like the way
my parakeet's was when J.F. stepped on its tail
and pulled out all of the feathers.
The poor thing sat in his cage for hours,
panting, wings slightly open.

Alan died alone in a parked car at
a gas station of a heart attack — 22 years old,
the smartest, most arrogant bastard I ever met.
He pissed me off when he told the whole
fiction and verse workshop that he was
tighter than Hemingway. And I get to think
about grad school while he is under all that
dirt and mud, and I am in another country studying
French. Who gives a fuck about French. Alan
is dead. And the week after he died I found five
hundred dollars, and my roommate told me
that Alan would send me many gifts.



And it's north and it's
late and it's cold
and I read or I write or I
count my change again and it
is always the same sum and
there is still work to be done,
words to be looked up, letters of
recommendation to be requested.

Down the hall a shower is turned on
and it is not popular to talk about death
too much or to smell too bad. You
should always be clean for polite company
or in case of accident.
The sun is rising,
And I can't sleep.